

YOUR PROJECTS

Celebrating the work of family and local history societies



'Local people, local pride'

Alan Crosby learns more about a web project in South Cheltenham that aims to preserve the history of local shops and businesses



Above: Arthur and Mary Chapman;
Right: The shop he once owned in Bath Road, Cheltenham, now sells fish and chips



Cheltenham Connect is a local community organisation founded in 2009 to strengthen and empower the residential and trading community of South Cheltenham, Gloucestershire – its motto is 'Local people, local pride'.

Among its projects has been developing **cheltenhamsouthtown.org**, a fascinating website based on historical research into shops and shopping in the area, looking at how they have evolved as well as the history of individual businesses stretching back over two centuries.

Stuart Manton, the project director, told me that he was born in the area and traces his family there back to the early-19th century. Since it was a fast-growing community in the Victorian period, with many incomers, that is quite unusual. He feels it gives him an affinity for that part of the town, which he says is a great place to live. Stuart pointed out that projects like this help people to understand how the place where they live and work developed over time, bringing about a greater sense of being part of a community.

Interactive maps

The project website has excellent interactive maps of the different 'quarters' of the area. These give an overview of the history and you can then click on any present-day business and find detailed historical information about the premises, its changes of use and ownership, and the people and families who lived and worked there.

The website really is a fine example of how

a local project can create a genuinely valuable online historical resource.

Photos through the ages

The site is lavishly illustrated with photos of buildings (then and now), people and adverts. It's also entertaining – I loved the story of 166 Bath Road, where electrician Arthur Chapman lived in the 1920s with his wife Mary (see the photograph above of her wearing a splendid hat!) and their five children.

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"The shop was double fronted – in one window Arthur had a black china cat and in the other a black china dog. He replaced the eyes on both creatures with flashing lights. On one occasion an elderly gentleman was quite cross with him saying that it was an outrageous waste of electricity.

"Arthur, a motor mechanic during the First World War, loved to tinker with anything mechanical and made a radio receiving station in a room above the shop, where he was able to receive British broadcasts. When Arthur and Mary's family grew to seven children, they moved on and the shop became a fried fish shop."

That's social history of the sort you can't discover in the official sources!

The project has great potential for further development, too. The work is ongoing and research is in progress on the last two or three shopping streets.

As Stuart explained, the sources for researching the traders change over time. For the 19th century and early-20th century, the researchers drew heavily upon the local trade directories, census returns, newspapers and town guides. But the last trade directory appeared in 1975, after which time they used *Yellow Pages* (but that is very difficult to search by address, rather than specific trades).

Of course, the latest census available is 1911 and today's local newspapers carry fewer advertisements. All of this makes it essential to call upon people's memories of how life was in former days, as well as for specific information about

who lived where, and what individual shops were like. The intention is that the website will include increasing amounts of oral history and reminiscence.

The project is always on the lookout for more material so if you think you might have information or illustrations, please contact them. And if you live in the Cheltenham area, why not consider becoming a member? ■

Fact file

For more information about Cheltenham Connect, visit **cheltenhamconnect.co.uk**. If you have any queries about the South Town project or have information and illustrations, get in touch via the 'Contacts' page at **cheltenhamsouthtown.org**.